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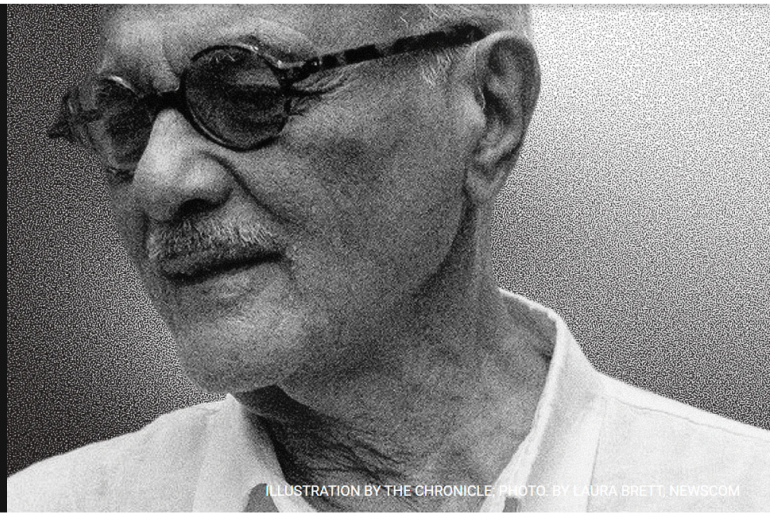
Mahmood Mamdani Doesn't Want to Talk About Zohran

The Columbia scholar, and father of the mayor-elect, on politics, academe, and antisemitism.



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THE REVIEW | CONVERSATION

By Evan Goldstein | November 7, 2025

"Let's not talk about the mayor thing." Thus Mahmood Mamdani made clear that he did not want to discuss his son, Zohran, who 48 hours earlier had been elected the next mayor of New York City. If the father was feeling anything other than exhaustion — and he did look very tired — he wasn't saying.

Long before Mahmood Mamdani's surname became ubiquitous in national politics, it loomed large in the field of postcolonial studies. In several major books, he explored the enduring effects of colonialism — specifically, how various political and legal statuses, such as "citizen" and "subject" (the title of his 1996 book) explain various inequities and power differentials in postcolonial societies. Last month, Harvard University Press published his new book, *Slow Poison.* Mamdani tells the story of post-independence Uganda through the lens of two national leaders — Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni — and his own experiences as a scholar at the Makerere Institute of Social Research, in Kampala, and as a member of the country's minority Asian population.

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Mamdani has been on medical leave from Columbia University — "back issues," he said — though he plans to return to teaching next fall. He does so with trepidation, given some of the provisions of the deal Columbia struck in July with the Trump administration.

For an hour, Mamdani spoke quietly, indulging in long pauses, and discussed the relationship between politics and scholarship, the protests that convulsed Columbia last year, and how the FBI introduced him to the work of Karl Marx. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Evan Goldstein: Is it true the FBI first introduced you to Karl Marx?

Mahmood Mamdani: One day there was a knock on the door of my dormitory room at [the University of Pittsburgh], and I open it to these gentlemen in brownish, long coats. One of them says "FBI." I was so excited because I'd seen this on television. They said they wanted to talk about the march that I had been part of.

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Goldstein: This was the civil-rights march in 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama?

Mamdani: Yeah, big, big student march. It was organized by SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. I wasn't a member of SNCC, but a friend and I were walking opposite the Student Union at Pittsburgh, and we saw SNCC leaders talking about civil rights. And we just had to go in there and listen to them. They said, "Hey, there are buses outside, and we're going to Montgomery to march." So we went.

> **"The price of inserting yourself is that you can no longer claim objectivity, but you can claim positionality, and I was OK with that because it's also a more honest book."**

The FBI agents asked if I knew Karl Marx. I said I hadn't met him. They looked at one another and said, "No, he's long dead." It was my turn to be surprised. "Then why are you asking me?" Well, they explained, he believed that rich people's money should be taxed and distributed to the poor. I said that sounded like a fine idea. The agents eventually decided that I had nothing that would be of interest to them.

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Goldstein: Let's turn to *Slow Poison*. Why did you write this book at this point in your career?

Mamdani: *Slow Poison* combines political theory, history, and a bit of memoir. My family was very keen that I insert myself in the narrative. Over time I got convinced. The price of inserting yourself is that you can no longer claim objectivity, but you can claim positionality, and I was OK with that

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Goldstein: Let's turn to *Slow Poison*. Why did you write this book at this point in your career?

Mamdani: *Slow Poison* combines political theory, history, and a bit of memoir. My family was very keen that I insert myself in the narrative. Over time I got convinced. The price of inserting yourself is that you can no longer claim objectivity, but you can claim positionality, and I was OK with that because it's also a more honest book. In *Citizen and Subject*, my major book on these issues, I was not part of the story. *Slow Poison* is told through a narrative of two prominent political leaders, Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni, and their tenures as presidents of Uganda. It illustrates some of the dilemmas of postcolonial Africa and different successive attempts at decolonization. As I got into the book and began to look at the differences between the two, I gained some appreciation of Idi Amin in the sense that I began to understand the context in which he was acting, his reasons. I also began to shed some of my appreciation of Museveni.

Goldstein: The idea that you've gained an appreciation for Idi Amin will raise some eyebrows. For one thing, this is the man responsible for your expulsion from Uganda in 1972.

Mamdani: Not an appreciation of Idi Amin but an appreciation of the context and the challenges he faced. Amin was trained as a mercenary, a child soldier, by the British. He was taught to be a ruthless, violent person. And he indeed was ruthless and violent. The worst, most violent period of his rule was the first two years when the army was split and thousands were massacred in their barracks. His close allies were the British and the Israelis. The British had suggested that he assassinate Obote [Milton Obote, who led Uganda before Amin]. The Israelis were skeptical. Even if he succeeds in assassinating Obote, they said, his entire power structure would be intact; his military forces would be there. So Amin dealt with that power structure by physically eliminating them. That was the worst period, a period in which his closest allies were the British and the Israelis, and you could say they were accomplices in this mass murder. Amin's killings became far fewer and far more selective, targeting prominent persons like the chief justice or the vice chancellor of the university, persons he suspected of being connected to the opposition.

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Goldstein: You mention that one of Amin's targets was the vice chancellor of the university. A theme of your writing broadly, and in *Slow Poison* specifically, is the relationship between the work of politics and the work of scholarship. I was struck by a colorful anecdote describing the one time you encountered Amin in person when he visited Makerere University, where you were a TA at the time. "I will not tolerate you spreading political gonorrhea in Uganda," Amin warned the assembled scholars. A few weeks later, you were expelled from the country along with other Ugandans of Asian descent. Do experiences like that color how you view the conflict between the Trump administration and American higher education?

Mamdani: In Uganda at that time, like most African countries, we had a single national university. It was the place from where both the government and the opposition came. Usually the people running the government were not at the university. But it was the home of the opposition. So you could understand the government targeting the university not for academic reasons but as a political threat.

The American situation has been a little different. If you look at the cultural wars that have developed over several decades, the university is the habitat where the cultural warriors are said to be. Added to it, of course, are more directly political issues, which were dramatized by October 7, 2023, and the encampments.

Goldstein: You mention October 7. You're a major figure in the field of postcolonial studies, an area that's loomed large and been controversial the past few years. A consistent criticism of the field is that it perpetuates simplistic binaries — oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized — especially when applied to Israel and Palestine.

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Mamdani: There's something in that critique. But it fails to understand the strength of the postcolonial field, which is that the claim to independence should not be taken at its word. A lot of the colonial legacy survived formal colonialism. And a lot of the field is about the institutional and the ideological carriers of that survival. Earlier writers who focused on decolonization looked at how control of the economy did not really change with political independence. Then came a different group who wrote about political institutions and how the modes of governance didn't change. They remained as they had been designed during the colonial period. And these scholars became interested in the university. The university claimed to be a global institution, a universal institution, an institution that stood for excellence. The first big debate which emerged in the African university after independence was a debate at the University of Dar es Salaam about excellence counterposed to relevance. Relevance is not universal in its claims. It's particular, place specific, time specific. The single-minded pursuit of excellence can give rise to a World Bank/IMF-type cookie-cutter logic. Relevance gives rise to debates about the nature of the society you're living in, its historicity. To return to postcolonialism, the critique was right insofar as it maintained that the more it became binary, the more postcolonialism "degenerated" into formulaic thinking. The middle ground got blurred.

"If you want to demonstrate at Columbia, you have to step outside the gate. Whatever freedom is left is outside the gate."

Goldstein: Let me see if I understand. There is a nuance and richness in the field, especially its origins, but some tendencies toward classification got too simplistic, too binary, and this represents, to use your word, a "degeneration."

Mamdani: One needs to see the difference between the world of scholarship and the world of politics. Scholarship comprises two different kinds of debates, two different kinds of conversations. One is an academic conversation, which is a conversation between different schools of thought and between those who propose and those who critique. There is also another conversation with society, which is also important and influences scholarship. These binaries — oppressor, oppressed — are to some extent an influence of the political on the academic.

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Goldstein: A couple questions about Columbia. When the encampments first went up in the spring of 2024 I think you were the first faculty member to address the protesters. You gave a talk on the history of divestment movements. You've long been a proponent of divesting from Israel. Do you remember how you felt that day? Were you optimistic, proud, worried?

Mamdani: The talk was not on divestment in Israel. It was on lessons of the divestment movement in South Africa.

Goldstein: Right. I just meant that you also are a longtime proponent of divesting from Israel.

Mamdani: It was on the lessons we needed to draw from South Africa. And the main lesson is that divestment was one strategy. It was not the sole strategy. Divestment was directed from outside. But the larger strategy inside South Africa was actually engagement — engagement with the middle ground, like church groups. And I had a critique of one tendency in the Israel divestment campaign, which basically talks about a total boycott. I wasn't convinced, and I'm still not convinced. If there are just five people who are not certain, it's worth talking to them.

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Goldstein: This talk of middle ground and engagement: Is it accurate to say you're cautioning against extremes?

Mamdani: I don't want you to put those words in my mouth. It depends on the extreme. In any political struggle, you need to isolate your adversary. You cannot do that if you just direct firepower at the adversary. You have to talk to those around the adversary. You have to talk to what I've been calling the middle ground. You have to take the adversary's reluctant supporters and win them over.

Goldstein: Based on what you witnessed firsthand during the protests, or what you subsequently heard about secondhand or read about in, for instance, Columbia's Task Force on Antisemitism reports, were you ever concerned about the campus climate for pro-Israel, or even just not anti-Zionist, Jewish students at Columbia?

Mamdani: Look, the big question with the antisemitism debate is, what is antisemitism? You have two definitions out there, the IHRA [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance] definition and the Jerusalem Declaration. The IHRA definition basically comes down to saying that any critique of Israel is antisemitic. If that is the case, then it is the only state in the world that would be exempt from political critique. In other words, when it comes to Israel there's no democracy. There are no democratic rights. That's how I read it. The Jerusalem Declaration makes a very clear distinction between the State of Israel and the people of Israel. So that's at the heart of the discussion.

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Goldstein: Let's take a concrete example. What do you say to those who hear a chant like "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and hear an eliminationist slogan?

Mamdani: If you want to look for the earliest statement of "from the river to the sea," you will find it in the Likud party manifesto. So on both sides of this divide, whether Zionist or anti-Zionist, you have a claim that this land cannot be divided up. It's the middle ground which talks of a two-state solution, right? But the extremes want a one-state solution. Their difference is in the nature of the state.

Goldstein: To be clear, you reject that slogan in the founding documents of the Likud, and you're critical of it when it's chanted on Columbia's quad.

Mamdani: I've never heard it chanted.

Goldstein: You never heard that chant?

Mamdani: I've read about it.

Goldstein: So you have no sympathy with the chant, but you are sympathetic to the one-state-solution idea?

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Mamdani: I'm sympathetic to only one type of one state, a state which is based on rule of law and guarantees equal rights. I'm opposed to any kind of discrimination. I'm opposed to any form of apartheid which I understand to be a legally enforced distinction between two groups in society, where one benefits and the other is penalized.

Goldstein: I want to bring up a point that Rashid Khalidi made, which is that Columbia for decades celebrated the late '60s campus protests that were, at the time, extremely painful and divisive. Khalidi believes that the Gaza protests will also eventually be embraced by the institution as a source of pride. Do you share that view?

Mamdani: Not fully, because I understand where that view comes from. It comes from a reading of the history of intellectual thought at Columbia. But a reading of the institutional history of Columbia

the history of intellectual thought at Columbia. But a reading of the institutional history of Columbia leads to very different conclusions. Columbia, over the course of the tenure of the last president, the one who lasted for decades —

Goldstein: Bollinger?

Mamdani: Yeah. Bollinger. During Bollinger's presidency Columbia changed structurally as an institution. The administration ballooned, and inside the administration the financial technocrats took over. There was less and less sympathy with Columbia as a place of thought. It was more about Columbia as an enterprise with gains and losses, profits and lack of profits. And so by the time Bollinger was leaving, the search was on for a super technocrat as the next president. They would put Columbia through an IMF-style structural-adjustment program. And they found this super technocrat in the World Bank and at a small university, LSE [London School of Economics]. It didn't matter to them that this person had no experience in the American academy, no sensitivity to the nature of debates in this academy, because she was supposed to financially streamline the place. She came to do that. And then she had to face an encampment. Nature was unjust to her.

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Goldstein: Do I detect a tone of sympathy for Minouche Shafik?

Mamdani: Sympathy? I don't know about sympathy, but it's an understanding. It's like my understanding of Idi Amin. I understand that once Idi Amin realized what he was supposed to become, which is a grateful stooge, he rebelled and threw out his masters. She resigned.

Goldstein: Another question by way of Rashid Khalidi. As you know, he retired in 2024, but he was scheduled to teach a large lecture course this fall on the modern Middle East. In August, however, after Columbia struck a deal with the Trump administration, Khalidi said he no longer felt comfortable teaching at Columbia. The adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, along with other concessions, had turned the university — to quote Khalidi — from "a site of free inquiry and learning into a shadow of its former self, an anti-university, … a place of fear and loathing, where faculty and students are told from on high what they can teach and say, under penalty of severe sanctions." Do you feel comfortable teaching at Columbia right now?

Mamdani: I've been on medical leave while these changes have come in. The change that will immediately affect my teaching and everything is that every department that teaches on Israel and the Middle East is in receivership.

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Goldstein: A vice provost is reviewing those departments.

Mamdani: Incredible. Unheard of. In the world we grew up in, the idea was that the wider society could claim free speech but only the university could claim academic freedom. And academic freedom was broader and stronger and deeper than free speech. Now it's the reverse. If you want to demonstrate at Columbia, you have to step outside the gate. You can't demonstrate inside the gate. Whatever freedom is left is outside the gate. It is shameless. There's a police squad around Columbia. So I don't expect to be comfortable when I return. But I'm attracted to challenges. I will not run away, unless it's foolish. I will step into the lion's den, but not the lion's mouth.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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Evan Goldstein is managing editor of *The Chronicle* and an editor of *The Chronicle Review*.

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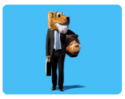

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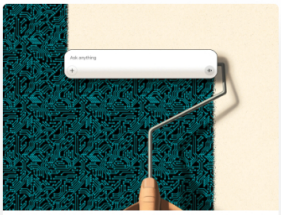

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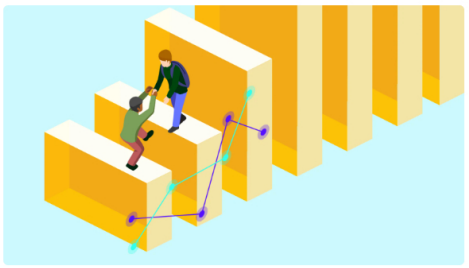

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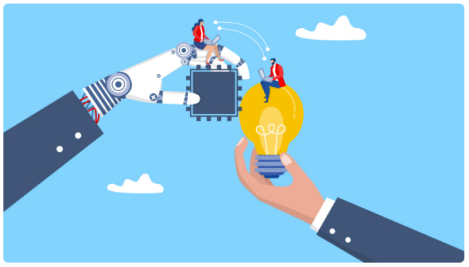

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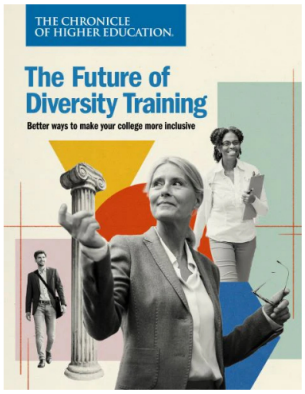

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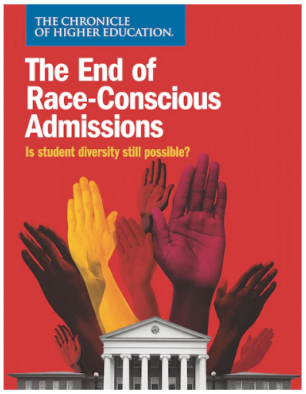

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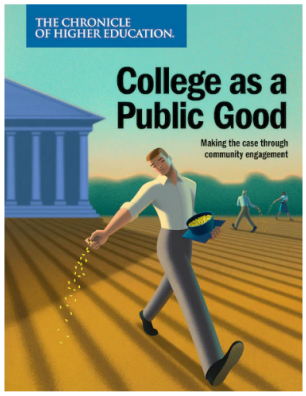

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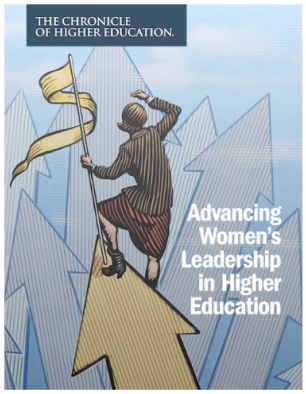

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